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Retreating Forwards

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Retreating Forwards

RETREATING forwards? It sounds impossible, doesn't it? but it is a luxury I permit myself every year in the autumn, and this is how I do it.

It begins on a Friday afternoon in October about five o'clock—no, sorry, earlier than that, because I am dashing around for days beforehand trying to leave everything in order so that my family can manage while I am away. Of course the whole thing is much easier if you are fortunate enough to have an understanding husband like mine. So when I have left a nice full pantry, clean shirts and socks just where they can be found, and, well, you know, everything just right, I set off carrying my small suit-case.

I remember the first time I went off on this adventure into silence, an acquaintance shouted at me as I dashed down our village street to the bus stop :

“Hullo ! Where do you think you are off to?”

I have wondered since how she would have reacted if I had shouted back to her :

“ I'm off to a Retreat!”

Because the very word retreat means to some people, defeat. But it isn't that at all. It is, quite simply, this . . .

Believing as some of us do that we come from God, we belong to God, we go to God, we also believe that there are times when we ought to go back to God, to leave the business of living to look after itself for a day or two, and to go home, to sit still beside our Father and listen to what He has to say.

I am fortunate again in living within an hour and a half's journey to Lincoln where this Autumn Retreat is held in the Theological College just before the students return for the autumn term, but with so many Retreat

Houses now in all parts of the country there is certain to be one within easy reach of your home.

I remember the first time I went, how very strange and awkward I felt and I expect if you were to come too you would feel the same. But that first newness soon wears off. You remember that you have come here to be with God and in the atmosphere of this lovely place you lose all self-consciousness. It is all so simple, reverent, and sincere.

You would love the quietness of that college in Lincoln which stands in such a sheltered corner behind the Cathedral, and as you enter and close the door behind you, really *do* close it. That is a piece of advice given by Evelyn Underhill in one of her books, and it is well worth remembering. Don't leave the door open even the tiniest chink, because, if you do, all your spiritual problems and your worldly anxieties will creep in with you and you'll find that you are, as Evelyn Underhill says, just "in for a worried religious week-end." No, leave them outside and you may find when you come out on Monday morning that they have gone. In any case if they *are* still there they won't look the same and you'll be able to smile at them.

Well, once inside, the first thing that usually happens is you are met by your hostess who helps you to find your bedroom, and this is a delightful study-bedroom with a single bed, a couple of chairs, a writing-table and ink, a fire, and—well, what more do you want? Then you unpack, wash and tidy up, go downstairs to the library and pay your fee which is ridiculously cheap, and then the gong sounds and it is time for supper.

After supper you are introduced to the priest who will be conducting the retreat, and to your companions, and you find that you are a very assorted company. I remember the first time, I met a young woman who was to be a missionary and shortly leaving for Australia, a welfare worker, several Mothers' Union workers, four school

teachers, three clergymen's wives, one or two hospital sisters, a matron, and others like myself, just Mrs. So-and-so housewife.

This introductory chat after supper is your last opportunity to speak until Monday morning, because after this you all go into the beautiful little chapel for prayers and the silence begins.

And silence we were once told is golden, not gloomy. After this short service in the chapel, you walk along to the dining room where there is a cup of tea and biscuits to which you help yourself without speaking and then off you go to bed.

You will be awakened at seven o'clock the next morning by a simply tremendous din, the rising bell, and the first day has begun. It follows a leisurely pattern which is repeated the second day. After the early Communion service at seven-thirty you have breakfast, and, if you are as self-conscious and awkward as I was at first, you'll probably do as I did and help yourself from the wrong urn and find you have coffee instead of that longed-for tea! But I learned to copy my companions, helped myself to a cereal, and then took my place in the queue at the serving table and received a plate of bacon and egg.

After breakfast there is an address in the chapel at ten o'clock, then coffee in the dining room at eleven, then prayers and another address at twelve, and lunch at one. Tea is at four o'clock, a third address at five o'clock, and dinner at seven. At eight-thirty there is a last address followed by Compline, then if desired a final cup of tea and so to bed.

In between these events you are free. Free to rest and read and meditate and, best of all, you are free to pray. What a treat it is to have time for prayer! Sometimes I stayed in the chapel, sometimes in the privacy of my own room, occasionally in the garden, and what a grand oppor-

tunity this is for prayer, undisturbed by all that interrupts you when you try to pray at home.

I made a good many mistakes at first, one of which was to sit in the library watching the red-gold autumn leaves drift gently down outside the tall windows and to tell myself I would just sit, I wouldn't read, I wouldn't do anything but just empty my mind so that I could listen to God. But all I heard was my own voice and a hum of domestic details . . . Are they all right at home? . . . Are they . . . Oh well, you know . . .

So, I remember, I turned to the library shelves and chose a biography and as I read, my own voice stopped nagging and gradually new thoughts came to me, refreshing and unexpected.

Another mistake I made was with the addresses. I thought, Oh, I won't bother to listen attentively; after all, I haven't come here for instruction, and I can listen to sermons any Sunday at home; I've come here to be with God, to know Him, not to know about Him. But I soon discovered the addresses were not sermons. In spite of myself I listened, then I began to take a note-book and pencil and to write as fast as I could all that was being said. To-day I have a set of note-books packed with a wealth of ideas to which I can turn for inspiration. Because the addresses are nearly always not so much an imparting of knowledge as sign-posts to study, ideas for your own meditation.

Of course it is useful to have notes from the addresses to refer to, and later, when you are all tied up with your work again, it is lovely to have the memory of these three quiet days, but the real purpose of the retreat is not to gain a little knowledge or to "get away from it all" but to pray and, in prayer, to draw nearer to God. To re-dedicate yourself and be renewed so that you can go back to your

job better able to help other people. A three-fold purpose in a way; at least it is for me; to listen, to look, to live. Rather like the traffic lights, you know, stop, get ready go. Here in the silence is your chance to hear the whisper of the Spirit, your chance to look again at Christ and contemplate His Mystery, your chance to start afresh. But you must listen, and your looking (by prayer and contemplation) must be a waiting alertness, eyes on the amber light only and not on the other traffic, so that when the green light shines you are ready to obey and move on.

It is surprising how soon you become accustomed to the silence and how easily you can sit at meals with your companions, pass each other on the stairs and never want to speak. Sometimes it happens, of course, that there is something you simply must talk about and then you take a look at the time-table posted on the notice board in the Hall and this tells you when the Conductor is free. You put a mark against the time you wish to talk to him and later you go and get it all off your chest.

Yes, those few days of quietness with God are a treat I would be very sorry to have to deny myself each year. Have you tried it? If not perhaps you will, and I'm pretty sure that if you do you will find when you open the door of the College on Monday morning and come out again into the noise and rush of every-day things you will be much stronger and better able to cope with whatever may be waiting for you. You will have learned a little too of the meaning of those lovely words: "My soul truly waiteth still upon God."

I'm not a historian by a long way, but I have an idea that a good many battles have been won by knowing when to retreat in order to listen to advice, to regain strength and courage, to rest, and to be inspired with fresh determination to go forward.